The press and attributions of responsibility: Voters’ perceptions of multi-level governance

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ABSTRACT: When considering elections in multi-level contexts, scholars have typically assumed – in line with second-order election theory – that the way voters approach an election depends on their attributions of responsibility, that is, on what they see as being at stake in that election. This assumption is questionable. The formal position is not always clear, and is further blurred by parties and the media. Moreover, many voters pay little attention to politics and have little incentive to trace constitutional responsibilities. In this paper I use data from election studies in two multi-level contexts, Ontario and Scotland, to explore the nature and impact of voters’ attributions of responsibility. In the latter case I also examine the influence of newspaper readership – itself a multi-level phenomenon – on these attributions. The evidence suggests that, when called upon in surveys to do so, many voters can confidently and fairly accurately assign issues to different levels of government. Yet plenty of other voters are less sure, and there is considerable evidence that their newspaper can sway their judgement, about both responsibility for specific issues and overall importance. The press thus appears able to influence voters’ thinking and behaviour in multi-level contexts.

1 I am grateful for the support of the ESRC in funding the Scottish Election Study 2007 (RES-000-22-2256). My thanks also go to James Mitchell and Orit Kedar for their advice and comments. The 2003 Ontario Election Study survey was funded jointly by Navigator Research and by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and the research was directed by Greg Lyle (Navigator Research) and Fred Cutler (University of British Columbia). The OES Team is not responsible for the analyses and interpretations presented here.
1. Introduction

Issues are the currency of political debate. And, while the nature and extent of issue voting is a matter of long-standing debate (e.g. Heath, Jowell, and Curtice, 1985; Rabinowitz and MacDonald, 1989; Iversen, 1994; Clarke et al. 2004), few contemporary electoral researchers would exclude issues altogether from their models of party choice. Issue voting takes two main forms (Stokes, 1963). With position issues, on which voters and parties take different stances and favour different policies, voters tend to support a party whose stance broadly matches their own. With valence issues, on which voters and parties are basically agreed about the desired outcomes of policy, voters tend to support the party they see as most likely to deliver these outcomes. In either case, this simple picture is much more complicated in a context of multi-level governance. Ideally, of course, voters will hold each level of government responsible for its policies and performance, and will not reward or punish it for decisions or outcomes outside its control (Partin, 1995; Orth, 2001). The democratic credentials of such arrangements depend at least in part on such electoral accountability.

Yet the clear delineation of responsibilities in multi-level polities is extremely difficult. Few if any issues or policy areas can be unequivocally attributed to a single level of government. Anything that is disputed by politicians and debated by constitutional scholars is bound to present problems for voters. In this study I examine whether and how voters cope, assessing how readily they can ascribe responsibility to different levels of government, and identifying some of the cues on which they rely in forming these attributions. Particular attention is paid to the role of the media, specifically the press, as a source of such cues. There are theoretical grounds to suppose that voters will infer the relative importance of arenas from their relative prominence in newspaper coverage, and this paper provides empirical evidence not only that this happens but also that it has electoral implications.

The theoretical starting-point is a discussion of the second-order elections thesis (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), hitherto the dominant theoretical perspective on voting in multi-level contexts. Having identified the centrality of attributions of responsibility in this approach, I then discuss the nature and origins of such attributions, and highlight the potential role of the media in their formation and impact. This leads to the specification of four research questions. To address these questions, I draw on data from two cases, Scotland and Ontario. Having briefly introduced these cases and the datasets to be used, I present analyses bearing on all four questions. In the
final section I assess the implications of the results for our understanding of voting behaviour, and the influence of the political media thereon, in multi-level contexts.

2. Issues in ‘multi-level elections’

In a landmark article, Reif and Schmitt (1980) drew a distinction between first- and second-order elections. By (their) definition, each country has only one first-order election: the ‘general’ election to its dominant national legislative chamber. All other elections – municipal, regional, upper house, European, and so on – are second-order elections. The crux of Reif and Schmitt’s argument is that, because voters perceive less at stake in these second-order elections, their decisions are instead driven by factors inhering in the more important first-order arena. This analytic distinction between first- and second-order elections has proved very durable in political science (Norris, 1997; Schmitt, 2005). However, there are reasons to question the simplicity of Reif and Schmitt’s initial formulation. As the term multi-level governance implies, a straightforward distinction between the national level and ‘everything else’ is inadequate. Many countries have more than one subnational level of government, and the amount ‘at stake’ can vary substantially between different levels (Hough and Jeffery, 2005). In federal systems such as Canada, the immediately subnational (subfederal) level is much more powerful than local or municipal governments – in that sense, it is ‘less second-order’ (Watts, 1989). Where there has been such extensive devolution of power from the centre, the status of subnational authorities can rival that of the national government, such that there may be said to be two first-order elections (Cutler, 2008). Or, since no level approaches the dominance of a unitary state, these countries might be said to have no first-order election. The picture is still muddier in a case like Scotland, where there might be said to be not only two first-order elections but also two ‘national’ elections.

These arguments point to a continuum rather than a dichotomy, with elections ranging from purely first-order (with decisions driven entirely by factors pertaining to that arena) to purely second-order (with decisions driven entirely by factors pertaining to another arena) (van der Eijk et al., 1996; Heath et al., 1999; Hough and Jeffery 2005). The configuration of elections along this continuum constitutes a pattern of what might be called ‘multi-level elections’. This pattern can vary in three important respects, and issues underpin all three. First, it can vary across countries, along with their different structures of multi-level governance, and in particular with
the way that policy responsibilities are divided among levels. Second, it can vary across time within the same country (and not only via the redistribution of formal powers). For instance, an economic crisis is liable to render most non-national elections more second-order, because voters will be preoccupied by an issue for which national governments are principally responsible.

The third type of variation, most important for present purposes, is at the individual level. In a given country at a given time, citizens differ in the importance assigned to each arena. An election’s overall location on the first- to second-order continuum reflects the aggregation of what may be quite widely differing individual perspectives. Such heterogeneity may result from different issue priorities (those primarily concerned with the economy are likely to see non-national elections as more second-order), or perhaps from differences in political focus. For example, those voters with stronger Scottish than British identity seem likely to regard Scottish elections as more important, and to treat them as more first-order. But it may also result from different perceptions of how responsibility is allocated across levels. This is likely to be a matter of perception rather than knowledge, partly because many voters will be unaware of the de jure constitutional arrangements, and partly because in any case the de facto situation is liable to be rather different (Brzinski et al., 1999). Insofar as the basis for these perceptions – whether media coverage, wishful thinking, partisan cues, or some other source (Anderson, 2006b) – differs across individuals, there is likely to be disagreement within the electorate about how responsibility is divided.

Whether one subscribes to the simpler binary model of Reif and Schmitt (1980) or the more complex notion of multi-level elections, the foregoing arguments hinge on two basic propositions. First, voters have formed at least an impression of the way that powers and policy areas are divided between levels of government. Second, these attributions of responsibility influence voters’ decision-making at election time. On the face of it, these seem straightforward and perhaps even uncontroversial. However, there are good reasons to doubt both. Those reasons are set out in the next two sections, along with the implications for the role of the media in the formation and impact of attributions of responsibility.

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2 Similarly, studies have shown that many Canadians see the federal and provincial arenas as separate ‘political worlds’, the relative importance of which varies between citizens (Wilson and Hoffman, 1970; Blake, 1985).
3. Attributions of responsibility I: Formation

It is well established that political knowledge is thin on the ground in mass publics (e.g. Neuman, 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Fournier, 2002). Knowledge of what Delli Carpini and Keeter call the ‘rules of the game’, a category that would include the distribution of powers across levels of government, is if anything sparser (1996, ch. 2). Hence many people will be at best uncertain about which level of government bears primary responsibility for a given policy area. Furthermore, in some cases even the most aware citizen would find it difficult to identify where responsibility lies. The tendency for central or federal governments to retain economic powers means that they could be argued to be ultimately responsible for virtually any issue (Oates, 1999; Cutler, 2004). Even in cases of fiscal federalism, subnational authorities’ room for manoeuvre is constrained by macroeconomic conditions. Then there is the point that many issues, at least as understood in common parlance, encompass matters belonging at different levels. For example, ‘law and order’ involves policing, for which the Scottish government at Holyrood is clearly responsible, but also the raft of counter-terrorism measures taken by the UK government at Westminster. Such blurring of responsibility leads to political argument about who should have the credit for success and the blame for failure in the disputed issue territory (Tuschhoff, 1999). Confusion is exacerbated by parties’ tendency to campaign on their safest ground, regardless of whether in constitutional terms those issues are at stake in the election. In all, it is not surprising that surveys reveal a large majority of Canadians agreeing with the statement “It is often difficult to figure out which level of government is responsible for what” (Cutler, 2004), and the results would very probably be similar in other multi-level contexts.

This is not to say that voters simply cannot form attributions of responsibility. Just as the dearth of political knowledge is well established, so is the notion that citizens can nonetheless make political decisions using a variety of rules of thumb, or heuristics (Sniderman et al., 1991; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Lau and Redlawsk, 2006). If called upon to consider where responsibility lies for a particular issue, there are various cues or shortcuts available to voters. One is to apply a general impression: if a given authority is seen as more powerful overall, it is a reasonable guess that it bears responsibility for that issue. A different kind of heuristic is partisan reasoning (see Rahn, 1993). Party identifiers will share their party’s wish to claim credit for success and to avoid blame for failure, and so they will attribute responsibility to those levels of government at which their party has achieved success or an opponent has presided over failure
A variant on this kind of wishful thinking is to attribute responsibility to those levels of government that a voter would like to see granted more powers. This is particularly applicable to cases like Scotland, where the constitutional arrangements are apparently in flux and are themselves a contentious issue. As De Winter and Swyngedouw (1999) show with respect to the EU, citizens tend not to know how much the EU does, but they do know how much they would like it to do.

Another source of cues that is of particular interest here is the mass media. Different levels of government can act as alternative frames within which coverage of a given issue can be set (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001; Trenz, 2004). Where issues are routinely discussed in the context of a particular arena, citizens’ considerations about them will be associated with that arena, and as a consequence they are more likely to attribute responsibility for the issues to that level of government (see Zaller, 1992). Note that this process does not entail any active persuasion on the part of the media. Where constitutional responsibility for an issue is a matter of dispute, some media sources may seek to sway voters’ attributions in one particular direction. Partisan newspapers, for example, have the same incentive as partisan voters to assign credit for success and blame for failure in ways that work to their party’s advantage. However, probably the more common effect is simply the fostering of cognitive associations between issues and arenas as described above.

Along similar lines, framing in this regard is less likely to be a matter of deliberate and issue-specific choice on the part of a media source, and more likely to derive simply from that source’s general geographical and political focus. Here I refer to this as ‘arena bias’. Other things remaining the same, we can expect that national media are more likely to frame an issue in the context of national politics. A similar argument can be made about the sub-national level, albeit with the qualification that the boundaries of sub-national political units are not necessarily congruent with those of sub-national media sources. The fact that framing is a matter of focus more than deliberate persuasion means that the discussion here applies as much to television as to the less assiduously regulated press. For example, news reporting from BBC Scotland pays close attention to the Scottish government’s reaction to the global financial crisis, whereas the

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3 For example, the German newspaper market is centred on major cities rather than on the Länder. Nonetheless, regional newspapers are less likely than their national counterparts to discuss issues within a federal frame.
BBC’s British news – also broadcast in Scotland – is concerned largely with the Westminster government’s response.

Choice of media sources is thus a potential source of individual-level variation in attributions. Insofar as a citizen tends (for whatever reason) to rely on media based at and focusing on a particular arena, she is more likely to ascribe responsibility to that level of government. Moreover, there are reasons to expect the media to be a particularly potent influence over attributions. For one thing, they are the major source of political information for the overwhelming majority of voters (e.g. Graber, 1984; Newton, 1999). For another, dependence on the media is still heavier with complex and rather esoteric questions such as attributions of responsibility, on which it is unlikely that media messages will be filtered and shaped by much subsequent debate within citizens’ discussant networks (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Schmitt-Beck, 2003). On the other hand, the very fact that attributions are a matter of relative obscurity rather than intense controversy means that the various media have limited incentive to take strong and conflicting stances. They may therefore carry broadly the same message, in which case the potential asserted at the beginning of this paragraph will go unfulfilled. Whether ‘arena bias’ will disrupt such homogeneity, and thus create disagreement about attributions within the electorate, is ultimately an empirical question, and one that is addressed in this paper.

4. Attributions of responsibility II: Impact

The same can be said of the question of whether attributions of responsibility go on to influence electoral choice. However, there are some salient theoretical points to note first. One feature common to the heuristics and cues discussed above – including reliance on the media – is that they are liable to lead voters astray. In complex information environments, heuristics often lead to ‘errors’ – i.e. decisions different from those that the citizen would have taken if better informed (e.g. Bartels, 1996; Lau and Redlawsk, 2006) – and such shortcuts are most effectively deployed by those who already have a reasonable amount of background knowledge (Sniderman et al., 1991; Kuklinski and Quirk, 2000; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). Moreover, for those less interested in politics, the effectiveness or accuracy of a heuristic is less important than its accessibility (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001). Put another way, the less engaged are more concerned that a shortcut is short than that it leads them in the right direction. This brings us to the crucial
role of motivation. What incentive do voters have to form clear attributions of responsibility, and to base their voting decisions at different levels on these attributions? Cutler (2004) recalls Alexander Hamilton’s concerns in *Federalist Paper* No. 70 that citizens lack the time, resources, and commitment to trace the lines of responsibility in government. And since knowledge and motivation are close cousins, those voters who are least sure where responsibility lies are also the least troubled by this uncertainty.

The importance of motivation means that survey evidence on attributions of responsibility can be misleading. Survey responses are often not pre-existing attitudes and perceptions, but are instead constructed during the survey process (Zaller and Feldman, 1992; Tourangeau *et al.*, 2000; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002). When called upon to answer difficult questions about attributions of responsibility, respondents may answer almost at random (Converse, 1964), or use one of the above heuristics to generate a quick answer, or invest considerable cognitive effort into ‘working out’ the answer (see Krosnick, 1991). Or of course they may have the ‘correct’ answer in working memory anyway. The first two possibilities explain why Cutler and Mendelsohn (2001) found considerable instability in Canadians’ attributions of responsibility. The second two explain why, when aggregated, the responses were broadly in line with the constitutional position. However, the fact that survey respondents are willing and able to report attributions, and that on balance these suggest a broadly rational public, does not mean that such attributions are readily accessible to voters outside the survey context. And it certainly does not mean that such attributions are uppermost in voters’ minds when choosing at election time.

On that point, the existing direct evidence is limited (and somewhat conflicting). There is ample evidence that economic evaluations are less influential over vote choice when, due perhaps to coalition or minority government or a strong second chamber, it is less clear that an incumbent party can be held responsible for economic conditions (e.g. Powell and Whitten, 1993; Anderson, 2000; Nadeau *et al.*, 2002). The implication is that, when attribution of responsibility is difficult, voters are less likely to attempt it. Anderson (2006a) suggests that the same applies when, as in multi-level governance, lines of responsibility are blurred ‘vertically’ (as opposed to ‘horizontally’ as in the studies cited just above). This expectation is confirmed: “economic voting is weakest in countries where multilevel governance is most prominent” (2006a, 449), specifically when fiscal powers are devolved from the central government. Thus, in the federalised system of Canada, Anderson (2006b) found no evidence that attributions of
responsibility moderated the effect of economic evaluations on voting. Support for the incumbent Liberals in the 2004 federal election was affected by perceptions of national economic performance, but this effect was not significantly stronger among those who attributed responsibility for economic conditions to the federal government. Cutler (2004), in a similar analysis but based on evaluations of health rather than the economy in Canada, reaches a different conclusion. Whether in provincial or federal elections, those who perceived deterioration in the health care system were disproportionately inclined to punish the incumbent if they saw that level as mostly responsible for health. However, those who thought health care worse “but could not finger one government as ‘mostly responsible’ were no more likely to oppose the government than those who saw no deterioration” (2004, 32). In this case, those with a clear picture of responsibility were influenced by that attribution when voting. Yet those struggling to assign responsibility seemed to give up, such that the issue was irrelevant for their voting decisions (despite their reporting it as highly salient). Cutler’s evidence suggests that they simply refocused on other (simpler) issues (2004, 34-5).

These arguments and findings cast doubt in particular on the ultimate impact of the media over voting decisions. Even if citizens draw heavily on information from television or the press when called upon to form attributions of responsibility, this media influence is ephemeral and of marginal significance if attributions then do little to condition the effects of issues on party choice. However, it would be premature to dismiss the possibility of media impact. The studies reviewed above were based on performance evaluations on individual issues. Yet many scholars argue that issue voting takes a more general form, with voters seeking parties whose broad policy stances matches their own, or forming broad impressions of the competence of parties and leaders rather than assessing performance on specific issues (e.g. Heath et al., 1985; Clarke et al., 2004). This makes sense given the limits on political interest and knowledge noted above, and the resulting proclivity of voters to use heuristics as substitutes for more detailed information.\(^4\) Attributions of responsibility may well work in the same way: while voters struggle to link individual issues to particular levels of government, they maintain broad impressions of the relative importance of these levels, and take these into account when voting (see Johns et al., forthcoming, ch. 6). In this case, ‘arena bias’ could again be a channel for

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\(^4\) As Anderson (2008) shows, it is the better informed voters for whom attribution of responsibility on a specific issue (the economy) moderates the effect of that issue.
media impact. Heavy focus on a particular level of government is likely to magnify both its perceived overall importance and its influence over voting decisions. This possibility is explored empirically later in the paper.

As usual when positing media effects, however, it is crucial to note a caveat about causality. Citizens’ choices of reading and viewing may reflect the relative prominence of different arenas in their political world view. If so, then the apparent effects of media ‘arena bias’ on attributions and on electoral choice are spurious. For example, the choice of a Scottish (as opposed to a London-based) newspaper and the view that the Scottish Parliament matters more may both be manifestations of giving a higher priority generally to Scotland and its politics. In the absence of long-term panel data or other more sophisticated means of disentangling causal effects, the sensible approach to this perennial problem is to acknowledge the possibility and to attempt to control as far as possible for the predispositions that are likely to influence both choice of media and the political attitudes and behaviour in question.

5. Research questions
The general purpose of this paper is to investigate the nature and origins of attributions of responsibility, with particular attention to the role of the media. More specifically, I address four research questions:

Q1. How sure are voters of their attributions of responsibility?
Voters unsure about their attributions are less likely to be influenced by them at election time (see Gross et al., 1995; Glasgow and Alvarez, 2000). The data used in this paper offer some scope for assessing certainty at the individual level, though sadly no opportunity to gauge stability over time, the standard indicator of the crystallisation of attitudes (Saris and Sniderman, 2004). There is, however, rather more scope for inferring certainty from the aggregate level – the more consensus among voters about where responsibility lies, the more sure the electorate can be said to be of its attributions.

Q2. Which factors can predict voters’ attributions of responsibility?
Since the politically engaged are more likely to know where responsibility lies for various issues, we can expect measures of political involvement – including media exposure – to predict attributions of responsibility (Hobolt, 2005). Identifying other predictors of attributions – like
partisanship, or constitutional preferences – gives us an idea of the shortcuts used by those lacking prior knowledge (Anderson, 2006b). My concern is not only with the variables that predict attributions of responsibility, but also with variance explained. Sniderman and Bullock argue that “the predictability of positions citizens take on specific issues given their general political orientations” (2004, 337) is a distinct dimension of attitude strength. The more variance in attributions of responsibility that goes unexplained, the greater the suspicion that these attributions are nonattitudes, and the less likely they are to influence electoral choice.

**Q3. Do attributions of responsibility vary according to the focus of chosen media sources?**

The ‘focus’ in question refers to the level of government with which the media source is primarily concerned. This could and ideally would be measured via close content analysis of the arena within which coverage is customarily framed. As described in the next section, a more rudimentary approach is necessitated here. Either way, this question amounts to a test for ‘arena bias’ on attributions of responsibility for specific issues.

**Q4. Does the relative impact of arenas on party choice vary according to the focus of chosen media sources?**

Many voters may work with overall impressions rather than issue-specific attributions, in which case we might expect the answer ‘no’ to Q3 but ‘yes’ to Q4. A positive answer to this question would be in line with a recurring theme in studies of the political media, namely that they can influence what people think about even if not what people think.

**6. Cases and data**

These questions are addressed with data from two cases, Scotland and Ontario. Before outlining the data sources used, it is worth briefly discussing why these cases are chosen, and the similarities and differences between them. The Scottish and Ontarian governments occupy quite similar positions in structures of multi-level governance. Both have considerable powers, notably over key public services like health, education, and public transport. Unsurprisingly, then, there is clear evidence of ‘first-order’ voting in elections in both Scotland (Curtice, 2006; Johns et al., 2009) and Ontario (Cutler, 2008), with voters rewarding or punishing incumbent performance at that level as opposed to simply passing comment on the performance of the UK or Canadian governments. Nonetheless, these latter authorities do retain key powers, and as noted above the
control of macroeconomic levers means that their influence spills into almost every policy area. In the terms of Anderson (2006a), then, there is lack of clarity along the vertical dimension of responsibility in both Scotland and Ontario. Hence we can reasonably expect attributions of responsibility to vary across issues – with, say, health much more often attributed to the provincial level than is the economy – but also across individuals on the same issue. That latter type of variance is crucial in allowing us to address Q2 and Q3.

There are also noteworthy differences between the two cases. First, in some key respects Ontarian governments are more powerful than their Scottish counterparts. They have much more fiscal autonomy, in terms of both tax-raising and borrowing, which is one reason why Canada is regarded as the most decentralised of advanced democracies (Watts, 1989; Anderson, 2006a). A second difference is that the current allocation of powers is much newer in Scotland (dating only from the devolution settlement of 1997) and so voters are likely to be less sure about constitutional arrangements that are still in the process of bedding down. Moreover, these arrangements remain an issue of major controversy in Scottish politics. Whether or not they know how responsibilities are currently divided between Scotland and Westminster, most Scottish voters have a pretty clear idea of how they would like them divided. As argued above, this wish might prove the father of the thought when voters are asked about attributions of responsibility.  

The third and most important difference relates to the press in each country. Newspaper readership in Scotland is split roughly evenly between two types of newspapers: ‘Scottish’ papers (i.e. those based in Scotland and with only Scottish versions); and ‘British’ papers (i.e. Scottish editions or versions of newspapers also printed – and usually based – in London). In Canada, by contrast, the large majority of press circulation is accounted for by sub-national newspapers. This may partly explain why, at least over the past decade or so, election surveys in Canada – whether for federal or provincial elections – have not included questions about the specific newspapers read by respondents. It would perhaps be premature to conclude that Q3

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5 With this in mind, a closer comparison would be between Scotland and Quebec (e.g. McLean, 2001; Henderson and McEwen, 2005). Ontario was chosen instead precisely because it allows us to explore how voters attribute responsibility in a less politically charged atmosphere.

6 This second category is very heterogeneous. In some cases the newspaper sold in Scotland is simply the London edition; in other cases the content of the Scottish edition is almost entirely different, and is produced by Scottish journalists from offices in Glasgow and with very little editorial interference from London. Yet it is difficult to quantify differences in content (let alone in editorial interference). The dichotomy employed here is at least simple and classification is not open to dispute.
and Q4 are not applicable or pertinent in the Ontarian case. Nonetheless, given the lack of data, the upshot here is that those questions can only be addressed in the Scottish context.

Similar data restrictions enforce the focus on newspapers rather than television. While precisely the same process – ‘arena bias’ fostering associations between issues and levels of government in voters’ minds – can be expected to work with national and regional television, few surveys include detailed questioning about respondents’ choice of news and current affairs programmes. Such data are not especially reliable, in any case, largely because television viewing patterns are less regular than the purchase of newspapers. Even in the latter case there are well-rehearsed problems concerning whether those who report readership are indeed reading and in some way processing the political information it contains. However, these difficulties militate against finding media effects and so raise no doubts about any that can be identified.

Although most work on second-order elections was based on aggregate election results, this is a highly indirect means of inferring the basis for voters’ decisions. Answering questions like Q4 requires well-specified individual-level models of party choice (Cutler, 2008). One reason why such analyses have been comparatively rare in the multi-level context is that the necessary funding is usually only available for general elections. The data sources used here are exceptions, each being a major survey study of voting at a subnational (or at least not a general) election. The 2003 Ontario Election Study (OES) is a rolling cross-section survey conducted over the telephone (by Opinion Search, Inc.) during the month running up to polling day on 2 October, with a total N of 2,252. Post-election interviews were conducted with 1,016 of these respondents. However, since the questionnaire varied over the pre-election fieldwork period, some of the core questions used here were asked only of a relatively small sub-sample of respondents. Hence the available N varies in the analyses below. The 2007 Scottish Election Study (SES) is a panel survey conducted over the internet (by YouGov), with a pre-election wave two weeks before polling day on 3 May and a post-election wave in the days immediately after the election. Total Ns for the two waves are 1,872 and 1,552 respectively. The analyses reported here are based on weighted data (using the variables ‘wgt_fin’ (OES) and ‘post_w8’ (SES)). For further details on these studies, to check the wording and coding of questions, and to download the data, visit www.politics.ubc.ca/index.php?id=4946 (OES) and www.scottishelectionstudy.org.uk (SES).

7 With the exception of studies of US state-level elections (e.g. Kone and Winters, 1993; Carsey and Wright, 1998).
7. Results

Q1. How sure are voters of their attributions of responsibility?

Before turning to the limited individual-level evidence on this first research question, I begin with aggregate indications of agreement within each electorate. Respondents in both surveys were asked to attribute responsibility for a (different though overlapping) range of issues. The precise question wordings are:

[OES] We'd like to know if you recall which government has primary responsibility in the following areas. If you don't know, just say so. Which government has primary responsibility for ________?

[SES] Would you say that ________ is mainly the responsibility of the British government at Westminster or the Scottish executive at Holyrood?

In both surveys a ‘don’t know’ option was explicitly offered. The options ‘both’ and ‘other’ were not offered in either survey, but were accepted in the telephone-based OES if volunteered by respondents. The distributions of responses by issue are presented in Table 1.

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</table>

All Ns = 797
On balance, these look like ‘rational publics’ (Page and Shapiro, 1992) in that the aggregate attributions of responsibility correspond to constitutional reality (insofar as that can be discerned). For example, responsibility for health was most often attributed to the Scottish and Ontarian governments, while economic power was more often assigned to the UK and Canadian authorities. However, in almost all cases there were substantial minorities dissenting from the general view (plus non-negligible proportions of ‘don’t know’ responses). Such minorities were larger in the Scottish case, due perhaps to the relative novelty of those constitutional arrangements, or to the lack of fiscal autonomy of the Scottish government which weakens its control even over devolved matters. Yet this difference between the two cases should not obscure the fact that none of the figures in the table exceed 70%, indicating at least some uncertainty on each issue. The point here is not to assess whether this shows the glass of public awareness to be half-empty or half-full. It is simply to note that these answers are consistent with the suggestion that, while some voters can confidently allocate powers to different authorities, many others are unsure.

That point is reinforced by individual-level evidence from the OES of 2003, in which respondents were also asked (about a slightly different range of issues): “How certain are you about how much responsibility each level of government has for ____? Are you very certain, somewhat certain or not very certain?” Here, ‘don’t know’ was not explicitly offered, but accepted if volunteered. The distribution of responses is set out in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% &quot;How certain are you...?&quot;</th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Not very</th>
<th>(DK)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity supply</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>794</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 One reason to avoid such speculation is that both the OES and SES will overstate the awareness of their respective publics. In both samples the well educated are overrepresented and abstainers are underrepresented, and both turnout and education are positive correlates of political engagement and knowledge.
The results in Table 2 suggest considerable public confidence in their attributions of responsibility. On each issue, around three quarters of respondents were at least ‘somewhat’ certain. This is impressive, especially given that – as noted above – on a separate question more than 70% of respondents agreed that “It is often difficult to figure out which level of government is responsible for what”. There are some cautionary notes to sound. First, confidence did not differ greatly by where responsibility was attributed. So, if a certain attribution is deemed ‘correct’ (or at least more accurate) for each issue, plenty of respondents were confident in a misattribution. Second, given the differences between the two cases in Table 1, we can probably infer that Scottish voters would be rather less sure of their attributions. Third, there remains in both cases a minority of respondents who cannot assign responsibility with any confidence, and certainly it seems unlikely that their voting decisions at different levels of election will be influenced by considerations about where powers lie. All that said, the evidence so far suggests that many voters, perhaps even a majority, can if called upon attribute responsibility with confidence and often with accuracy.

Q2. Which factors can predict voters’ attributions of responsibility?

The next step is to consider the predictors of attributions of responsibility. I focus here on two issues, health care and the economy, that were asked about in both surveys, and that were salient (as usual) in the two elections (Johns et al., forthcoming, ch. 4; Cutler, 2008). The basis for analysis is a set of binary logistic regressions, predicting for each issue whether it was attributed mainly to the UK/Canadian or the Scottish/Ontarian government. (Those answering ‘both’, ‘other’ or ‘don’t know’ are omitted.) I first present the coefficient estimates, identifying the key drivers of attributions. Then I focus on overall predictability by looking at explained variance.

Each regression contains two sets of predictors. The first set, more or less equivalent (albeit with some differences in wording or coding) across the two countries, are demographic and political engagement variables. These test the supposition that the more politically active, interested, and knowledgeable will have a better idea of where responsibility lies. I also include education and newspaper readership as rough proxies for cognitive ability and exposure to

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9 In fact, those who deemed the province responsible for the economy, and the federal government responsible for health, were slightly more confident than the average.

10 All analyses are run using Stata, and all significance tests are based on robust standard errors.

11 The biggest difference was in the measures of political knowledge, which took the form in the SES of a true/false quiz on parties and issues in the 2007 election, and in the OES of open-ended questions asking respondents to name the leaders of the provincial parties.
political news respectively. (At this stage newspaper readership is simply a yes/no variable; it is in the next section that I examine the effects of different types of paper.) Age is included, too, on the speculative suggestion that older respondents may take longer to update their attributions in response to constitutional change. The second set of independent variables is included to try and identify the heuristics used by those needing shortcuts to form attributions. These variables differ between the two cases, partly because the party identification variables are different, and partly because the SES offers a range of constitutional preference questions – to test the ‘wishful thinking’ idea sketched above – which did not have equivalents in the OES (where constitutional issues are presumably less pressing). The Scottish regressions contain three such variables: support for independence (on an 11-point scale), and two Likert items measuring support for ‘more powers’ and for fiscal devolution for the Scottish Parliament. I also include a measure of national identity, to test whether identifying with an arena leads voters to project responsibilities onto it. Apart from age, all of the other independent variables are recoded to range from 0 to 1.

The coefficient estimates for the two issue regressions in Ontario are reported in Table 3.

Table 3
Logistic regressions predicting attributions of responsibility for health and the economy, Ontario 2003 (0 = federal, 1 = provincial)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Health B</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
<th>Health B</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics + political engagement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.01*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University educated</td>
<td>-0.34*</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly read newspaper</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.94***</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>0.97***</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of voting</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>-1.27**</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party ID</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive Conservative ID</td>
<td>-0.53**</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal ID</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Democratic Party ID</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.11**</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>-0.90*</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N= 617

12 The measure used is known as the ‘Moreno question’, and asks respondents to classify themselves as ‘Scottish only’, ‘Scottish more than British’, ‘Scottish and British equally’, ‘British more than Scottish’, or ‘British only’. Strictly, this variable should be converted into dummies for inclusion in a regression equation. But since its effects were nowhere near significance in either analysis, I treat it here as a single predictor for economy of presentation.

13 In this and subsequent tables, statistical significance is denoted as follows: * p<0.10; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01.
A first point to note about Table 3 is that the factors predicting attributions of responsibility can clearly differ sharply across issues. On health, there was a strong effect of political knowledge – the more aware being more inclined to attribute responsibility to the provincial government – and a rather weaker tendency for older and for more educated respondents to locate control at the federal level. On the economy, none of these variables had any significant effect. However, those likelier to vote were likelier to attribute responsibility to the federal government, while political interest tended to lead respondents to the opposite attribution. Overall, there is not much indication that political engagement enables voters ‘correctly’ to assign responsibility. There is also only limited evidence of partisan differences in attributions, and again the picture differs across issues. PC identifiers are more likely to assign health care to the federal level, while NDP supporters are more inclined to ascribe economic responsibility to the province. This could be argued to reflect those parties’ longstanding orientations to Canadian federalism, with the PC’s sympathies perceived as lying closer to Ottawa. The final noteworthy feature of Table 3 is the general paucity of significant effects. I say more about this shortly, having first looked at the corresponding analyses from the Scottish data. Table 4 reports the results.
### Table 4
Logistic regressions predicting attributions of responsibility for health and the economy, Scotland 2007 (0 = Westminster, 1 = Holyrood)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Health</th>
<th></th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics + political engagement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.02***</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University educated</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.53***</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly read newspaper</td>
<td>-0.24*</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>1.30***</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>1.30***</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>-0.96***</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of voting</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>-0.66***</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party ID + constitutional attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative ID</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour ID</td>
<td>-0.32*</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lib Dem ID</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP ID</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish (&gt; British) identity</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to independence</td>
<td>1.09***</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More powers for SP</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>2.43***</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal powers for SP</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.38***</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>-1.43***</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* N= 1302 (Health) 1244 (Economy)

Looking first at demographic and political engagement variables, the results in Table 4 are rather more consistent, both across issues and with expectations. Education, political knowledge, and willingness to vote are all associated with attributing responsibility for health to Holyrood and for the economy to Westminster. (Political interest has the expected effect with respect to health, but not to the economy.) Most of these differences are highly significant.¹⁴ Turning to the other variables in the model, there is some evidence that Labour supporters are readier than SNP supporters to attribute responsibility to Westminster, but partisanship looks largely irrelevant. National identity is wholly irrelevant. However, there is some evidence of a ‘wishful thinking’ effect when we look at constitutional preferences. Those who support independence are much more likely to attribute responsibility for health to the Scottish government. On the economy,

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¹⁴ Older respondents were noticeably more likely to ascribe responsibility for the economy to Westminster. However, since there was no parallel effect with health, this result cannot really be explained via the earlier speculation about belated reaction to the impact of devolution.
there is a parallel effect but this time the driver is the desire for more powers to the Scottish Parliament (rather than secession).\textsuperscript{15} Taking the table as a whole, though, significant effects are again the exception rather than the rule.

That brings us to the issue of the overall predictability of these attributions. In Table 5, I present three indicators of model fit for the regressions in Tables 3 and 4: Cox and Snell’s pseudo-$R^2$ measure, the percentage of cases correctly classified, and the log-likelihood (multiplied by -2).\textsuperscript{16} In each case the statistics are presented for three specifications: the null model (as a baseline comparison), a model with only the demographic and political engagement variables (Model 1), and a full model with the partisan and (in Scotland’s case) constitutional preference variables added (Model 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ontario</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% correctly classified</td>
<td>% correctly classified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$-2(LL)$</td>
<td>$-2(LL)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null model</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 1 (demog. + engagement)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2 (all variables)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly these attributions of responsibility are highly resistant to prediction. This is especially true in Ontario, where the variance explained is negligible, and adding variables does not improve prediction at all. Things are slightly different in Scotland, where both the political engagement and the constitutional attitudes add at least something to explanatory power. In the former case the difference may be due to the recency of constitutional change, with which the less politically aware have yet to catch up. In the latter case, it seems that constitutional preferences offer a cue to Scottish respondents who might otherwise struggle to decide where

\textsuperscript{15} This difference across issues perhaps makes some sense, in that polls show the economy to be the commonest priority among those seeking more powers for the Scottish government.

\textsuperscript{16} Since this latter value is partly a function of sample size, listwise deletion was used such that only cases available for Model 2 were used in calculating the statistics for the slimmer models.
responsibility lies. Such a cue is not so readily available to Ontarians. It is the weakness of Model 1 across the board that is most striking, though. Politically engaged respondents were barely different from the unengaged in their attributions of responsibility; in other words, such engagement does not seem to be much help.

There are two rival interpretations of these results. First, these models may be seriously under-specified, and a good deal more variance could be explained with the addition of certain key independent variables. There are, however, reasons to doubt this. The model is not noticeably leaner (and the pseudo-$R^2$ not much lower) than in Anderson’s (2006b) similar analysis. And a variety of fuller specifications were tested without much boost to variance explained. The second interpretation is that the attributions of responsibility reported in these surveys were in many cases nonattitudes, delivered off the top of respondents’ heads and not tightly linked to their broader political thinking and predispositions (Zaller, 1992; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002). This interpretation sits uneasily with the suggestion in Table 2 that respondents were quite confident in their attributions, although conceivably that reported confidence could itself lack deep roots.

On the basis of the results so far, it is difficult to adjudicate with much conviction between these two interpretations. In either case, though, there are grounds for exploring the impact of the press. Some of the ample variance unexplained by the regression models could be explained by the type of newspaper read by a voter. And the potential for media effects is magnified if, as on the ‘nonattitudes’ reading, many citizens are very unsure about how to attribute responsibility. As noted earlier, the data required for a closer examination of newspaper effects are available only in the Scottish case. Ontarian data are less sorely missed, however, given the lack of any evidence that readers and non-readers differed at all in their attributions. In Scotland, by contrast, there was some indication of such differences. Although the effect was significant only in the health analysis, it is telling that both coefficients have the same negative sign. Readership did not help voters to assign responsibility ‘correctly’, then, but instead in both cases encouraged attribution to the UK level. At first sight, this might be put down to a continuing Westminster focus in the Scottish press. In the next part, I examine that possibility more closely.

Q3. Do attributions of responsibility vary according to the focus of chosen media sources?
Altogether, 78% of SES respondents reported that they read a daily morning newspaper either ‘every day’ or ‘sometimes’. Of those naming that newspaper, 56% read a ‘Scottish only’ paper while the remaining 44% chose either a British (or at least the Scottish edition of a British) paper.\textsuperscript{17} The key question is whether these two groups differ in their attributions of responsibility. In the upper panel of Table 6 I report the proportions within each group attributing responsibility to the Scottish Parliament for each of four key issues: health, the economy, law and order, and education.\textsuperscript{18} The results for non-readers – who serve as a kind of control group – are also included.

Table 6  
Attributions of responsibility by type of newspaper read, Scotland 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% 'mainly responsibility of Scottish Parliament'</th>
<th>N (min.)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Law/order</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-readers</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>74.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish paper</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>82.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British paper</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>71.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference (Sco - Bri)</td>
<td>13.7***</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>15.2***</td>
<td>11.5***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloids only</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish paper</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British paper</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference (Sco - Bri)</td>
<td>10.5**</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
<td>13.7***</td>
<td>11.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadsheets only</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish paper</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>85.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British paper</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>84.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference (Sco - Bri)</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>10.5**</td>
<td>10.4**</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Judging by these data, the answer to Q3 is basically ‘yes’. On three of the four issues, readers of Scottish papers were significantly more likely than readers of British papers to attribute


\textsuperscript{18} Of the six Scottish issues in Table 1, transport and the environment are omitted here. This saves space and at relatively little cost given that these issues are of marginal electoral significance.
responsibility to the Scottish Parliament. (The significance levels are obtained via chi-squared
tests of the differences between the two newspaper groups – that is, with non-readers omitted.)
In those three cases, the gap is not only significant but also quite wide. Moreover, there is
evidence that both types of newspaper contribute to ‘arena bias’, given that the results among
non-readers typically fall between the two readership groups. That said, there is a closer
resemblance between non-readers and those reading British papers, suggesting that Scottish
papers are particularly influential over attributions. The issue that shows no signs of press
impact is the economy. It may be, then, that Scottish newspapers tend to highlight the powers
that are actually wielded in that arena, rather than simply persuading readers that the Scottish
Parliament is more powerful across the board.

Two important checks are necessary before ascribing these findings to ‘arena bias’. The first
is to explore a potential confound with a different aspect of these newspapers, namely whether
they are tabloids or broadsheets. Broadsheets accounted for almost three in five of Scottish
newspapers but only one in four of the British newspapers read by SES respondents. It may be,
then, that the differences discussed just above are more about broadsheet newspapers informing
readers of the powers of the Scottish Parliament, rather than Scottish newspapers persuading
readers of these powers. A simple way of testing this is to repeat the analysis for tabloid and
broadsheet readers in turn, and the results from this are reported in the lower panels of Table 6.
The headline finding is probably that there remain significant differences between Scottish and
British newspapers even holding type or ‘quality’ of newspaper constant. However, there are
also some interesting differences across issues. On health and education the arena effect
occurred only among tabloid readers. Since these were in a sense the ‘easier’ (that is, the most
obviously devolved) Scottish issues, the obvious explanation is that readers of broadsheets –
whether British or Scottish – already knew that the Scottish Parliament was responsible and were
impervious to newspaper effects. As already noted, law and order is a less straightforward case,
and so it makes sense that arena effects were observed among both tabloid and broadsheet
readers. Again, the economy is the outlier, with only broadsheet readers affected. There is no
immediately apparent explanation for this finding.

Many of the erstwhile broadsheet newspapers are now tabloids in size and shape. Here, though, I use the
traditional term (not least because the most common alternative, ‘quality’ newspapers, is increasingly inaccurate).
The second necessary check is to see whether the effects of newspaper readership hold in a multivariate context. To do this, I reran the regressions from Table 4 but replacing the single ‘regularly read newspaper’ variable with four dummy variables indicating whether a respondent reads a tabloid, a broadsheet, a British paper, and a Scottish paper. Non-readers are therefore the reference category for each of these four variables. The political engagement controls allow us to check whether the apparent effects of reading tabloid or broadsheet newspapers are due to differences in prior interest or awareness. Meanwhile, the party and national identities and the constitutional preference variables act as proxies for respondents’ own ‘arena bias’, that is, their predisposition to see either the Scottish or UK level as more important and to choose a newspaper accordingly. The effects of the control variables were shown in Table 4 (and are little different either in the re-specified models or with the two new issues) and so I save space by omitting those coefficients from Table 7, which simply includes the coefficients for the four newspaper variables. I also report a measure of effect size, namely the percentage change in the odds of the dependent variable. This denotes how much more or less likely (than non-readers) are readers of that type of paper to attribute responsibility for that issue to the Scottish level.

Table 7
Newspaper readership effects in multivariate logistic regressions predicting attributions of responsibility for four issues, Scotland 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Health (N=1302)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Economy (N=1244)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>% Δ odds</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads tabloid</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>+1</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads broadsheet</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>+57</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads Scottish paper</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>+13</td>
<td>0.54*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads British paper</td>
<td>-0.32*</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-27</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the picture is quite mixed, some patterns can be discerned in Table 7. First, with controls for political engagement, there is little sign that the choice of tabloid or broadsheet has
an impact on attributions. The one exception is that broadsheet readers were more likely to recognise the Scottish Parliament as responsible for health policy. There is more evidence of the arena effects that are the main focus of this section: in other words, there are reasons to answer ‘yes’ to Q3. All eight coefficients have the expected sign (although one of them is virtually zero) and four are statistically significant at the p<0.10 level. Before controlling for respondents’ predispositions to see a particular arena as important, it seemed that the Scottish newspapers had more impact on attributions. With those controls in place, it becomes clear that British papers have the stronger influence, at least on three of the four issues. Once more it is the economy that is the exception, but that gives all four issues something in common: the strongest effect sees respondents led away from the ‘correct’ level – or at least the majority answer – by newspapers whose principal focus is also elsewhere. So, for example, British newspapers appear to persuade citizens that the UK government is mainly responsible for the devolved issue of education, while Scottish papers tend to lead readers to regard the Scottish Parliament as mainly responsible for the ‘reserved’ (i.e. not devolved) matter of economic policy. The case should not be overstated, not least because the blurring of constitutional boundaries makes it difficult to specify ‘correct’ attributions, but if anything these results imply that the press are tending to misinform rather than to inform. Moreover, going by the percentage change in odds calculations, the effects of ‘arena bias’ are by no means negligible. That reinforces the case for examining whether such bias goes on to influence voters’ electoral choices.

Q4. Does the relative impact of arenas on party choice vary according to the focus of chosen media sources?

As a first step, it is worth considering what voters themselves say about the context on which they focussed when deciding how to vote. In the post-election SES survey, those who reported voting were asked whether, in choosing their party, they had in mind mostly what was going on in Scotland or mostly what was going on in Britain as a whole.\(^2\) A comfortable majority (71%) report voting primarily on Scottish matters, but the more pertinent question here is whether this

\(^2\) The relevance of this variable hinges on the expectation that answers to the question are driven, at least in part, by attributions of responsibility. Calculating a simple count of how many of the six SES issues (see Table 1) respondents thought were primarily the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament allows the creation of a variable categorising the degree of responsibility as low (0-2 issues), moderate (3-4 issues) or high (5-6 issues). The proportions answering ‘mostly according to what was going on in Scotland’ were 55%, 72% and 81% respectively among these three groups. In short, the more that citizens think the Scottish Parliament can do, the the more attention they pay to Scottish matters when voting.
varies by newspaper readership. The answer is that it does, and in the expected direction, but not by much. The proportions answering ‘mostly according to what was going on in Scotland’ were 73% among readers of Scottish newspapers and 67% among readers of British newspapers (and 69% among non-readers). In the light of that narrow gap, it is not surprising that the effect of newspaper type – tabloid versus broadsheet as well as Scottish versus British – dwindles into non-significance when other variables are controlled. The basis for voting question was regressed on the newspaper variables plus the controls from Table 4, and the only significant effects were for political knowledge, Scottish identity and support for independence or further devolution (all of which were associated with voting according to what was going on in Scotland).

On this evidence, then, any arena bias in voters’ newspapers does not seem in turn to affect the considerations that voters have in mind when choosing a party. But further exploration is called for before confidently answering ‘no’ to Q4. Those studying electoral behaviour traditionally pay rather little attention to survey respondents’ own accounts of how they came to a decision.21 Rather, they investigate the characteristics, preferences, beliefs and attitudes that can predict party choice. I suggested earlier that the thinking behind Q3 may overestimate voters’ willingness to focus on specific issues, both when attributing responsibility and when deciding how to vote. Here, then, I focus on overall impressions of incumbent performance at the UK and Scottish levels. On a five-point rating scale from ‘very good’ to ‘very bad’, SES respondents were asked to report “How good or bad a job of running Scotland do you think Labour Ministers in the Scottish Executive have done in recent years?” A parallel question was then asked about the UK Labour Government. Research elsewhere has shown that evaluations of Labour at both levels influenced support for the party in 2007. Moreover, the relative impact of the two evaluations depends considerably on attributions of responsibility: the more issues that were assigned to a level, the stronger was the influence on party choice of evaluations at that level (Johns et al., forthcoming, ch. 6). What matters here, however, is whether the relative impact of the two levels depends on newspaper readership. Put another way, is the ‘arena bias’ of a newspaper reflected in the basis of its readers’ voting decisions?

21 The doubts are not so much about dishonesty but more about whether people really understand and can accurately report the reasons behind their thinking and behaviour (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Blais et al., 1998).
22 Although Labour was in coalition (with the Liberal Democrats) in the Scottish executive between 2003 and 2007, it was clearly the dominant coalition partner, and viewed as such by the voters (see Johns and Carman, 2008).
To address this question requires logistic regression analyses predicting party choice. The dependent variable indicates whether a respondent cast their constituency ballot for Labour (as opposed to any other party). The key independent variables are the two performance evaluations, alongside which the model also includes the predictors from Table 4 (controlling for other individual-level sources of ‘arena bias’) plus a range of variables that have proved significant influences on party choice in at least some previous models using these data (e.g. Johns et al., 2009). This model was estimated three times: among readers of Scottish papers, among readers of British papers, and among non-readers. In Table 8, as in Table 7, I save space by reporting only the coefficients of primary interest, which in this case are the effects for the Scottish- and UK-level performance evaluations.

Table 8
Effects of Scottish- and UK-level performance evaluations by newspaper readership in multivariate logistic regressions predicting Labour voting, Scotland 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Scottish level</th>
<th>UK level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-readers (N=229)</td>
<td>0.88*</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads Scottish paper (N=489)</td>
<td>0.64*</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads British paper (N=408)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relatively small sub-sample sizes mean that these coefficients have quite wide confidence intervals, and none is significant at more than the p<0.10 level. However, there is a consistent pattern to the results and it constitutes further evidence of an arena bias effect. Those who read a British newspaper were the most influenced by Labour’s performance at Westminster and least influenced by its performance at Holyrood. In short, these data imply a positive answer to Q4. Yet there is also a twist. Not too much should be made of this point, given that the differences between the top two coefficients in each column are non-significant, but it does appear that non-readers were more influenced by the Scottish arena – and slightly less influenced by the UK arena – than readers of Scottish newspapers. In this light, the overall impact of the press in 2007

23 Predicted probabilities were calculated using Clarify, holding other variables at their means.
24 In tests of the equality of coefficients, the only difference significant at the p<0.05 level was between the top and bottom coefficients in the Scottish-level column.
looks still less benign. Since this was a Scottish Parliament election, it seems reasonable on grounds of accountability to argue that Labour’s record in Scotland should have weighed heavier in voters’ decision-making. Reading a Scottish newspaper did not lead voters in that direction, and reading a British newspaper actually led them the other way.

8. Summary and implications
The purpose of this paper was to explore voters’ attributions of responsibility in multi-level contexts like Scotland and Ontario. At the aggregate level, voters tended on the whole to agree on where powers lie, and insofar as there was consensus it reflected constitutional practice. At the individual level, many voters expressed confidence in their judgements. However, these attributions were not readily predictable, even among the more politically aware voters, raising suspicions that they were not particularly deeply rooted in voters’ thinking about politics. Other things remaining the same, where political perceptions are rather hazy, the potential for media influence over those perceptions is enhanced, and there is indeed evidence here of such influence. Responsibility for most issues was more readily ascribed to the UK level by those reading British newspapers, and to the Scottish level by those reading Scottish newspapers. These differences persisted even controlling for a range of relevant background variables, revealing an apparent tendency for newspapers to persuade readers into what constitutional scholars would probably regard as misattributions of responsibility.

The direct electoral implications of these media effects are unclear. On the one hand, there are clear theoretical reasons to suppose – and normative reasons to hope – that voters will reward or punish a government only for those policies and outcomes for which it is deemed responsible. If so, then newspapers have the potential to shape the extent and nature of issue voting. On the other hand, since attribution of responsibility is by any standards a difficult task even for the politically aware, the likelihood is that voters will not attempt it. When a survey interview requires them to do so, we saw that voters seem on the whole to do a good job, but that gives no reason to suppose that they would otherwise invest such cognitive effort. Newspapers may thus have assisted SES respondents to answer the attribution questions, without this having a knock-on impact on party choice or the basis thereof. Yet, as is well established, citizens’ standard response to the cognitive demands of voting is to use heuristics and general impressions to simplify the task. And the analyses here suggest that newspapers can influence voters’ choices
by conveying different broad impressions of the relative importance of political arenas. Those reading British newspapers were disproportionately influenced by perceptions of Labour’s UK-level performance, and largely heedless – even in a Scottish Parliament election – of the party’s performance in the Scottish Executive.

The notion that voters will be more influenced by their newspapers’ arena bias than by their issue-specific attributions of responsibility is wholly consistent with an extensive literature on the psychology of voters’ decision-making. It is also consistent with Reif and Schmitt’s original article, which laid stress on the ‘campaign dimension’ and the way in which the mass media present these elections to voters. It is less consistent with much subsequent work on second-order and multi-level elections because it casts voters in a much more passive role. On this reading, an election’s place on the first- to second-order continuum is not determined by voters actively considering what is at stake and adapting their decisions accordingly. Instead it is determined by what is put in front of voters. The point is not that voters could not, if called upon, correctly identify which level has responsibility for a given issue, or is generally more influential. However, to expect voters to ‘overrule’ their newspaper, and to act (on their own initiative) like jurors asked to ignore evidence that was wrongly brought before them, is to overestimate their motivation to process and reflect on political information. Therein lies the potential for the media to influence not only attributions of responsibility – whether issue-specific or general – but also the basis for vote choice.
References


